

Review: Peter Wollen (1993/2008) *Raiding the Icebox: Reflections on Twentieth-Century Culture*. London: Verso.

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Centered around Andy Warhol's metaphor of accumulation as expressed in the title of the modernist art exhibitions he curated in 1969, Peter Wollen's *Raiding the Icebox* investigates the making of twentieth century art as what may be interpreted in terms of outward manifestations of a search for expressing one's difference or supplementing some inner lack. From the *Ballet Russe*, to American painting and African *para-tourist* artefacts, Wollen sees art as springing at the convergence of psychological impulses and objective facts confronting the individual, thus placing the work of art in complex contexts that both illumine and enrich it. Wollen importantly perceives art in Europe as reacting primarily to political and social pressures, whereas American art develops largely in relation with critical economic realities.

With no preface or afterword, Wollen's book starts in *media res*, with an almost visual presentation of the sensualist atmosphere in the 1900s European art: The first chapter, 'Out of the Past,' looks at the effigies of Orientalism in its decadent avatar. The Orient represents the screen against which the West projects its inhibitions (mostly sexual) and fears (of despotic patriarchy), as well as its longing for a different expression of the self. Twentieth century art is discussed in relation with the art of the preceding epoch: The nineteenth century Orientalism in France gives rise to the extravagance of costume and choreography in the *Ballet Russe*, to Paul Poiret's fantasies in fashion and interior decoration, and to Matisse's experiments with colour and the arabesque line. Likewise, Villiers de L'Isle Adam's 1886 character Hadaly in the novel *L'Ève future*, with her 'facsimile of image and sound' prefigures not only the cinema – 'the artificial living through illusion' (Wollen, 45) –, but also the recurrent tensions between the ornamental and the functional, sexuality and attempts at taming it, eros and logos. Similarly, Karel Capek's robots in the play *R.U.R.* (1917), contemporary with the successful implementation of Ford's assembly line, open for discussion the reification of humans. This connects with tendencies – in production, art, and philosophy - to dispose of emotions as unnecessary, cumbersome, and ornamental, while promoting an ideal of

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humanity that is simplified, effective, but also mechanized and potentially sterile.

Wollen looks at the developments – artistic and technological – surrounding the advent of film in the context of the tension between reason and passion. A chapter is dedicated to American painting, Jackson Pollock and Greenberg's theories of modernism. Surrealism, as the 'principal successor to Orientalism' is, for Wollen, the 'vehicle for a rejection of instrumental reason from within the avant-garde' (24).² Antonin Artaud's *La Revolution Surrealiste* (1925) is invoked as symptomatic for the appeal 'to the orient for aid against the binarism of 'logical Europe.' To this, Robert Desnos's voice adds to call 'on barbarism from the East to join him in revolt against the oppressive West' (24).

Against the Dionysian bias expressed in Pollock's 'morbid and extreme' art of 'immediate sensations, impulses and notions', Greenberg opposes the art of the future, which he envisages as Apollonian, balanced, and detached. This would be an art agreeing with 'the most advanced view of the world,' and as far from primal passion as possible (96).

Written in an alert, captivating style that makes reading each chapter an anticipated and relished experience, much like watching a favourite movie, Wollen's book engages with the staggering variety of twentieth century art trends. The focus is not so much on the oft-visited major *loci* of modernist art, as is on the shadowy, peripheral, crooked paths that more often than not bring into focus significant categories of the twentieth-century sensibility. Nevertheless, with the artist's search for a voice of his own, free from the bonds of tradition and/or European standards, the peripheral is incorporated in the central, as native art becomes part of the mainstream, and dreams and memories are integrated into consciousness.

Wollen does not shy away from extrapolating from facts to cultural trends, and overarching ideas. Nor does he fail to catch the inner dynamism of the cultural mechanism: What John Carl Flugel called the Great Masculine Renunciation is counterpoised against (and seen as giving rise to) *la femme cocotte*, as sublimation of the need for decoration, transferred thus onto the body of the woman. He perceptively remarks that the fascination with rationality and progress yields images of terror, like False Maria, Fritz Lang's robot character in *Metropolis* (1927). Wollen sees the dreaded heroine in the context of the dialectic between construed images of femininity and predominant masculinity, noting that: 'her role as enchantress and spellbinder puts her outside the reach of patriarchal order and reason' (47). The larger context of discussion is set by Bertold Brecht's antinomies between reason and feeling, individual and collective, the order of interiority as revealed in psychology and that of exteriority as manifest in action (49). Such antinomies are part of a 'cascade' that 'constituted the

² All references, unless otherwise indicated, are to Wollen, 2008.

identity of modernism, whose contrasting threads are: functional/decorative, useful/wasteful, natural/artificial, machine/body, masculine/feminine, West/East (29).'

Oppositions such as the ones between a perception of femininity as threatening *femme fatale*, or False Maria, and 'sadistic and aggressive paternal drives' (46) may be resolved through the agency of 'nurturing maternal libido' as personified in the spiritualized figure of True Maria, Wollen suggests. This would actualize the hope for 'a new kind of relationship between humanity, technology and nature' (57). The realization of this dream would require, Wollen speculates, 'a new reason, not the instrumental reason of utility and the machine as tool but an ornamental reason' (57). In the 'new form of mass art' which this ornamental reason institutes, one can recognize the art of film, characterized by 'formal rigour, but with a resituated hedonism and a transformed eroticism' (57). Film appears thus not only as revolving 'around the displacement of the fear of technology-out-of-control on to that of (female) sexuality-out-of-control' (46), but also as a potential medium for another rationality, different from both instrumental reason and sentimental ornamentation.

Faithful to his concept of integrating the practice of art and its theory, *Raiding the Icebox* is a rare instance of beautiful writing. It renders an almost cinematic sense of love for and deep understanding of the artists' fumbling in search for new forms of art, new techniques, as well as new awareness, posited in the tension between breaking away from the past and endeavours to invent or collate oneself.

The wealth of secondary avant-garde movements, or what seems less important from a twenty-first century perspective, acquires thus a somewhat deeper significance when analyzed by Wollen and related with concerns for the status of the work of art as expressed by theorists such as Benjamin, Greenberg, Brecht or Huyssen. The paradoxical nature of twentieth-century culture becomes increasingly noticeable when greater attention is paid, as Wollen occasionally does, to the peripheral, the deviant, and atypical, as opposed to the central, the normal, and usual. This is very much in tune with Andy Warhol's concern for the leftovers, the understudies, the misfits and rejects, suffering from 'nervous disorders,' never doing what they are expected or supposed to do, thus missing opportunity after opportunity, and deriving no heroism from their failures (168). In Warhol's interest in 'the star of the out-take' there is a sense of modernist rejection of the accepted, turned more radical as a rejection of the acceptable. The establishment, the center, the given and the expected are challenged from all directions. This challenging, springing from a failure to conform or comply with accepted exigencies, is theorized and rationalized, and thus acquires an aura of meaningfulness: 'it was the stars of the outtake that Warhol loved.' They 'were meaningful to him' (168). This love for the different, 'this identification with the rejected,' coexists with a desire to be the same.

Similarly, the search for meaningfulness (and emotionally charged) exists side-by-side with the fascination for emptiness. Contrary impulses exist alongside each other in modernism: Greenberg's hope of freeing painting from literature coexists with dreams of unifying the artistic experience. Such dreams have been surfacing recursively, in different forms and with modified emphases, from Samuel Rothafel's Radio City Music Hall *plateresque* productions in the 1930s, inspired by Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk*, to situationalism, and the Imaginist Bauhaus movements. Aspirations of this sort often crystallize in response to pervasive instrumental reason, with its reductionism, its functional and productivist aesthetic.

Testimony to a consciousness that still defines itself in relation with the avant-gardes, Warren adduces numerous details spanning the twentieth century's attempts at finding an always new and convincing artistic voice. Some may object that his overview occasionally turns into an inventory – well-articulated, everyone has to concede – more than an analysis at times, that facts are not sufficiently scrutinized, and glossed over. That their implications are not entirely explored, and their meanings not completely extracted off them. And, indeed, when are they?!

Undeniably, facts are preeminent in Wollen's *Raiding the Icebox*, and we are led to expect this; they abound, like in Andy Warhol's collections, until overwhelming. And, as in a mimetic phenomenon of contamination, they proliferate mostly in 'Notes from the Underground,' the chapter dedicated to Warhol himself. Nevertheless, they are always incorporated in an engaging narrative which is hard not to savor. Loyal to the concept of unifying theory and practice, art making and theorizing art, Wollen allows cinematic techniques to contaminate his writing. With the apparent detachment and objectivity of a movie director, he does not ponder on any one detail or constellation of facts more than is economically effective. Wollen is not an expository writer; he is an exploratory one, not one who has all the answers, but one who, as the cliché goes, sets the reader in search of his own. Thus, it is no wonder that the full significance and meaning of facts are sometimes left, in an auctorial game of involvement, for the reader to draw.

Conceived initially as an inquiry into postmodernism, *Raiding the Ice Box* underscores the idea that developments in late twentieth century cannot be understood without revisiting anew the trends that made up modernism. It reveals how modernism has taken shape not only around aesthetic issues, as it has crystallized at the crossroads of social issues and political strategies, as well as interrogations into the relationship between mass production and art. Much as the nineteenth century developed in relation to the Industrial Revolution, the twentieth century saw the advent of Fordism, mass production and mass consumption act as catalyzing economic pressures and organizing forces. Wollen notes interestingly that,

whereas modernism developed as criticism of consumerism, postmodernism took birth as its celebration.

The concluding essay “Towards the Future” wraps up the main tenets of the book and opens towards discussions of new and even future forms of art. Wollen identifies *migration*, *urbanization*, and *culture contact* as the three axes along which changes in arts are bound to happen in the immediate and more distant future. Invention and regeneration in arts will occur, he predicts, from the periphery, which is not only more flexible and inventive, but is also freer from the self-obsession of the metropolis.

From the ivory tower of the 1920s, to the ‘solitude as the engine of all creation’ (72), to groupuscules, national constructivism, and transnational movements such as COBRA, Bauhaus or the Situationist International, Wollen notes the increasing globalization of art, as well as its transformations from art of the elites to art for the millions, with a possible return to a more exclusive status in the form of para-tourist art. A similar dialectic can be perceived in the shift from representational art, to action painting and abstract expressionism, through Asger Jorn’s modifications interpretable as interchanges ‘between art, theory and politics’ (149), to the objectivity of Warhol’s art, and back again, to the representationalism of some of the contemporary art. Whereas Fernand Léger’s ‘new realism’ ‘expressed the new complexity of perceptual experience that typified a dynamic and multifaceted urban mass society’ (83), contemporary art in its various form aims to codify the delineaments of the spirit in search of itself at the crossroads of global and regional values, of reason and feeling, of a past often ignored and an overwhelming present.

Tributary to no received perception, *Raiding the Icebox* proposes original interpretations of twentieth-century art, along with insightful meditations on what it meant to be an artist during one of the most troubled yet compelling times in human history, the modernist years of feverish search for form and original expression, as well as for a new configuration of the self.

Perhaps the book would benefit from page referencing all quotations, as well as from having abstracts precede each chapter, though the index of (some) names and important concepts do make searching through the book easier. An edifying read for both students and experienced scholars, *Raiding the Icebox* book is an unavoidable must for anyone concerned with avant-garde trends, art, literature, as well as cultural and postcolonial theories.

Bibliography

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